

Femininity and Southern Belle Stereotypes in Texas Drill Teams

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Abstract

This study examines how high school drill teams engage with and challenge Southern Belle stereotypes concerning beauty and sexuality through a revolving feminist perspective. Drill teams, originating from Texas, are a type of dance team composed of uniformed girls commonly performing kick lines during halftime of a football game. This research is a case study of the “Sundancers” Drill Team at Westwood High School in Austin, Texas. Through a 12-month participant observation and five in-depth interviews, this paper aims to showcase the dancer’s perspective of the drill team and how it contrasts with popular belief. Specifically, this paper explores how diverse drill team members— across various gender, race, and dance backgrounds— navigate their individuality and social dynamics within a drill team. The analysis reveals that, despite the uniformity, traditions, and strict structure emphasized by drill teams, these teams provide a sense of belonging, increased confidence, and empowerment.

“Abstract” is a necessary section in a research paper. It may be constructed by gathering main points (summary) from each section of the research paper.

Keywords: Gender, Dance, Secondary Education, Femininity, Texas, Drill Teams

1. Introduction

Texas drill teams, commonly of a high school or university, are special dance teams traditionally composed of girls. These teams are known for wearing their uniform – white leather boots and hats, sequins, fringe, and skirts – while performing on the football field during halftime. The dance style is focused on unison, sharp movement, and military march on the field [2]. Drill teams are known for doing high-kick routines and using props like pom-poms, streamers, and batons [8].

I have been part of the “Sundancers,” the drill team of Westwood High School in Austin, Texas, for the past year. As a Chinese-American with a sole 11-year background in Chinese dance, I was often surprised by the culture and amount of traditions present within this close-knit family. The line “Our only tradition is change” is etched on the wall of the dance hallway, but ironically, drill teams are rich with culture and traditions [9]. From saying “yes, ma’ams” to a strict seniority priority system—discipline, respect, and support are the fundamental values in every drill team [4]. Most teams, including the Sundancers, have a demerit system that counts the number of tardies, unexcused absences, and forgotten costume pieces and removes members once they meet a certain threshold. On the other side, there is a merit system, not connected with the demerit system, which requires every Sundancer to collect 50 hours of service annually [5]. A primary way to get hours provided to the dancers is a voluntary system that pairs each dancer up with a male athlete to give them baked goods every game (there were roughly ten games every year per sport). The Sundancers call the sub-organization “Spirit Girls” for Football, “Baller Babes” for basketball,

and “Diamond Dolls” for baseball. Traditions like these, along with the heavy dominance of females in dance, made me reflect on the stereotypes of beauty and sexuality commonly associated with Texas dancers. I wondered how the dancers were affected and perceived these stereotypes [7].

Previous research has yet to analyze drill teams from the perspective of high school drill team members [10]. Through my study, I aim to analyze the dancers’ perspectives of the drill team qualitatively through a thick description of the ethnography style [9]. There is little research on stereotypes and femininity within a drill team as well [7]. In this field study, I will capture the dancers’ overall experience and perspective—understanding how they navigate their identity, social structures, stereotypes, and feminism as members of a drill team and as members of their communities [6].

This research investigates how drill teams have reinforced or challenged Southern Belle stereotypes of beauty and sexuality through a feminist lens. It seeks to examine how drill team members navigate their individuality and social dynamics within the team, considering variations across gender, race, and background. The study also explores high school drill team members’ perspectives on Southern Belle stereotypes, traditional beauty standards, and gender roles. Finally, it delves into how participation in a drill team shapes members’ understanding of femininity, providing insight into the interplay between cultural expectations and personal identity within this unique setting [11].

2. Context and Background

Drill Team History

The creation of the modern drill team is credited to Kay Teer Crawford and Gussie Nell Davis, who both independently pioneered this concept in different Texas towns in the 1930s. After college, Kay Teer Crawford wanted to create a dance team at Edinburg High School, her former high school, since she felt bad for her classmates who did not make the cheerleading team. Crawford created a spirited group that performed on the field during the halftime of a football game. She was inspired by a nearby boy’s Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets to incorporate military swing precision movements and discipline within this new team. Crawford later went to the University of Southern California to attain her doctorate and created the first dance competition called “Miss Drill Team USA.” [5] At the same time, Gussie Nell Davis started a pep squad as a physical education teacher at Greenville High School. This squad would go on the field during halftime and march and dance while the band played. In 1940, Davis started the Kilgore Rangerettes after the vice president of Kilgore College requested a group that could keep people interested during halftime. [8] She created the iconic drill team costume, including boots, gauntlets, a belt, a hat, and a short skirt. The Kilgore Rangerettes are the gold standard for drill teams to this day. Since then, there have been nearly 15,000 drill teams worldwide, mainly in Texas, Utah, and California. [9]

Overview of Drill Team Timeline

Before the fall, auditions are held to decide the drill team’s new members. Usually, the past members do not need to reaudition. Then, the high school drill teams start the school year with a Summer Camp to train all the members, called Line Camp. During football season, the drill team will attend and perform at every football game. The dancers perform the school song during the pre-game, perform stand routines during the actual game, and are on the field during halftime. The stand routines are short and straightforward routines that follow the band’s drumline. The drill team may also perform on the field below the student section alongside the cheerleaders. Drill teams also perform dance routines, usually hip-hop, at pep rallies. [4] After football season, drill teams head into competition season, where dances are more styled in specific competition categories such as hip-hop, jazz, and modern. The choreography is

more complex in terms of movement and formation. During the school year, drill teams often host a Spring Show, which is a formal recital and could include football season dances, competition dances, small groups, solos, and more. [6]

Traditions, Structure, and Community within a Drill Team

A critical point in drill teams is to mold dancers into servant leaders. The Officer Handbook of the American Dance/Drill Team dedicates 12 out of 69 pages to “leadership & time management.” [7] There is considerable emphasis on serving others and being disciplined. The demerit system is implemented to give punishments when rules are broken, while a point or merit system counts the number of service hours a dancer gets. Directors and dancers must respect each other by being responsive and replying, “Yes, ma’ams.” Many rules are in place to ensure the dancers look uniform, such as lipstick color, earrings, wearing the hat three fingers from the eyes, and the way to lace a belt. The Kilgore Rangerettes tryout page explains, “All team members must dress exactly alike with” [8]

Structure of Drill Teams

Directors are the dance teachers and administration of a team– the center of a drill team. Members are the dancers, and seniority is always prioritized by years on the team and grade level. Some of the most common roles are newbies (those who made the team and have yet to join), rookies (first years), and seniors. Seniors often get the most benefits, such as front formation in a dance, first to get food, and being pampered by gifts. Commonly, drill teams also have social officers who plan social events. Then, drill teams have line officers, called “captains” or “lieutenants,” who are the prominent leaders of a team and often lead the dance practices. The line officers wear white uniforms on the football field. Managers of drill teams are responsible for being administrative assistants to the directors. Booster clubs, commonly composed of dancers’ parents, participate in fundraising activities to provide fun and supportive events for the dancers [4].

High school drill teams prioritize building friendships. Most dance teams are split into squads, each led by one line officer, which organizes the formation of dancers during warm-up and in the football stands. Another system is big sis and little sis where a veteran member pairs up with a rookie member and provides gifts to each other throughout the year. Before a game, dancers recite the drill team’s poem and hype each other up for the performance. Sometimes, dancers will form a prayer circle. Additionally, through the booster club, most drill teams host annual socials such as a football banquet, winter social, and end-of-year banquet. Drill teams support other drill teams by clapping and cheering for each other, even during competitions [6].

Southern Belle Ideals and Dance

A Southern Belle, a term that arose in the 19th century, refers to Southern white ladies who are proper, pretty, and submissive. Southern belles are very family-oriented and thrive in embodying Southern hospitality. Their ultimate goal is to marry young men and become dutiful mothers. The Southern Belle aesthetic is about looking beautiful and graceful, and it is the gender role that remains today.

Drill teams are traditionally thought to be filled with Southern Belles, yet these stereotypes continue to be broken with the increasingly diverse teams. Still, hints of Southern Belle gender roles can be seen throughout drill teams– from the ideal of cultivating obedient and respectful dancers to the uniformity in appearance. Drill team dancers are often sexualized and associated with stereotypes since they can be perceived as a team of young girls cheering on football players in short skirts and performing for other people’s entertainment. Dance, in general, puts heavy emphasis on the appearance of one’s body; slim dancers are often preferred over dancers on the heavier side. Dancers themselves also spend hours in front

of a mirror, ensuring each move looks uniform and effortless. Drill team's strong emphasis on appearance, whether the beauty of an individual or gracefulness while dancing, makes dancers seem to conform to the Southern Belle gender roles [5].

Femininity In Drill Teams

Females have traditionally dominated the dance scene, and drill teams have historically allowed only females to follow this pattern. For example, most college teams, including the Kilgore "Rangerettes," only allow female hopefuls to audition. However, some drill teams are now starting to include male dancers. The Utah High School Activities Association Drill Team policies will change drill teams to be a mixed-gender sport beginning in the 2025-2026 school year. [8] The drill team's field uniforms often consist of a skirt or unitards, and dances occasionally incorporate aspects of feminine and sexy moves. Yet, despite the rigidity in appearance and traditions of drill teams, which may pressure members to conform to specific beauty standards, dance has proven to lead to positive self-confidence and boost self-esteem. The camaraderie of dance teams, like sports teams, provides a family and support structure for most dancers. Drill team performances are known for having confidence, decisive moves, and high energy. Drill team members rarely drop out and generally thrive within the team. [9]

3. Materials and Methods

I conducted my research over twelve months and acquired data through participant observations and semi-structured interviews.

Participant Observation

To conduct my research, I auditioned and officially joined the Westwood Sundancers for the 2023-2024 school year as a rookie and regular member. Sundancers took up two blocks in my class schedule, and I had to attend a two-and-a-half-hour practice every day. I simultaneously enrolled in Westwood High School—taking five academic courses throughout the year. I often struggled to balance schoolwork with the time and energy dedication required in a drill team, but I found the experience rewarding and insightful. My dance background comprises eleven years of only Chinese folk dancing—a unique dance style that utilizes ballet techniques. I joined on a whim, and I was surprised and lucky to have made the team as most of the auditionees were experienced studio dancers. Before, I prioritized only academics as Westwood is known in the area as an academically competitive school. Joining the team was a significant change for me. The social dynamics and team environment were unlike anything I have ever experienced, and I didn't have any peers on the team before joining.

Throughout the school year, I became inducted through the traditions and environment of the Sundancers. I fostered friendships with the other rookies. I had "big sis" and a squad to rely on when I didn't know what was happening. Despite my lack of dance background, I still found myself able to fit in, and I felt I improved a lot as a dancer and performer.

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted five in-depth interviews to understand the dancer's perspectives on their overall experience in the drill team and their opinions on stereotypes and feminism. I selected interviewees with diverse backgrounds in terms of race, grade level, and dance background. I also interviewed the first male dancer in history on the drill team.

The questions in my interview were based on the three objectives of the research. I also added some questions to understand the general drill team experience. I formulated around 40 questions and would

adjust the questions during the interview to further understand each dancer's experience. Here are a few of the interview questions:

- Personal Effect: After reflecting upon a year, what do you think being on the drill team has changed you? What have you earned from being on the drill team?
- Can you describe instances where being on the drill team felt empowering? Can you describe cases where being on the drill team felt objectified? If possible, please elaborate.
- Do any dance moves make you uncomfortable? If so, please elaborate
- Do you think participation in a drill team shapes femininity? If it does, how so?

Method of Collection

In July, after deciding on the interviewees, I contacted them and set up a time to meet them over Facetime. Each interview was around an hour, and I took notes during the interview.

Ethical Considerations

The interviewees gave their verbal consent to use our discussion in my study. Their identity will remain anonymous.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Navigating Individuality and Social Dynamics Within A Drill Team Diverse Reasons for Joining

Dancers join drill teams for many different reasons and each has a different experience before joining the team. Some of the dancers explain how they've always wanted to become Sundancers. For instance, Interviewee 4, who has trained in Indian dance forms, took up studio dance in middle school to prepare for her drill team auditions. Different circumstances cause different orientations; some simply want to try out just to see if they can make the team. Most of them do so because they are trying to find or trying to seek novel interfaces and a group. Interviewee 2 is a male dancer who wanted to break the masculinity stereotype and become a source of inspiration for young boys. Also, the drill team is the last place to which many students who will stop dancing in college will ever reach as a dancer. Every dancer underwent rigorous training on the dancing which brings up inclusion in the team notwithstanding the diversity among the dancers in the team.

Social Structure

The social dynamics within a drill team are complex and ever-changing, especially with the annual turnover of seniors and incoming rookies. Although most dancers develop strong relationships with their year's peers, age, experience, and prior friendships can occasionally cause the team dynamic to feel fractured. Despite these difficulties, a lot of dancers' closest friendships are with other members of their team. But, since they spend more than ten hours a week together, it can be taxing, particularly if members don't actively respect one another's or if rehearsals grow monotonous—the mood can quickly grow tense.

Academics & Fatigue

Balancing academics and drill team commitments is a significant challenge for Sundancers, particularly at a school like Westwood High, known for its rigorous academic culture. The mantra “Academics comes first” is often emphasized by directors, yet the reality is that many dancers struggle to manage their time—leading to lack of sleep, fatigue, and stress. This exhaustion can further strain relationships within the team and impact the overall atmosphere of the team.

Perceptions of Drill Teams in the Community

Perceptions of drill teams within the whole community vary widely. Most dancers receive strong support from friends and family, who often attend performances and gift flowers. However, other people in the

community are indifferent, sometimes even critical of drill team. For instance, Interviewee 5 mentioned that some of her peers don't take drill teams seriously, questioning its legitimacy as a form of dance and often disrespecting her. This lack of understanding can be disheartening for dancers who dedicate significant time and effort to their craft. However, family support, particularly from mothers involved in booster clubs or attending performances, often provides a crucial source of encouragement.

Race Dynamics

The racial composition of the Sundancers compared to the broader student body at Westwood High reveals interesting dynamics. While the student population is 39% Asian, 35% White, and 18% Hispanic, the Sundancers are predominantly White, with 69% White, 24% Asian, and 7% Hispanic members. Despite this, minority dancers generally do not feel excluded within the team. However, cultural differences can still create barriers. Interviewee 5, for example, felt like an outlier within the Asian community, where drill team participation is less common.

Discussion

The Sundancers' diverse membership and the shared experience of being on the drill team create a unique sense of camaraderie, despite individual differences in background, race, gender, and sexuality. The drill team's hierarchical structure sometimes leads to social fragmentation, particularly across different grade levels, but the greatest challenge the team faces is balancing academics with the demands of drill team life which causes fatigue and strains relationships. Additionally, the desire to defend the legitimacy of drill teams against stereotypes is a common sentiment among members, who hope their hard work is recognized and respected. Finally, while the Sundancers are racially diverse, they still reflect broader cultural barriers that may prevent more minority students from participating in drill team.

4.2 Drill Team Member's Perspectives on Southern Belle Stereotypes, Gender Roles, and Beauty Standards

Stereotypes and Beauty Standards

Through the interviews, it was observed that the Drill team members' stereotypes include being white, pretty, tall, slim, Christian, and even lacking in intelligence. Many dancers acknowledge these stereotypes but do not feel they significantly impacted during their experience on the team. Interviewee 2 noted that drill teams are sometimes dismissed as "just another set of cheerleaders," and how she was offended by how this overlooks the differences between the two groups. Similarly, most interviewees expressed a desire for others to recognize the hard work and dedication that goes into being a Sundancer, beyond the superficial image of being "pretty white girls who can dance." Overall, while stereotypes are acknowledged, they are not seen as a major concern for most dancers.

Baking for Male Athletes

A tradition in the Sundancer drill team involves earning mandatory merits by baking goods for male athletes, a practice that reinforces traditional gender roles. The Sundancers have sub-organizations like "Spirit Girls" for football, "Baller Babes" for basketball, and "Diamond Dolls" for baseball, where dancers are paired with male athletes to provide baked goods on game days. The male athletes can request a dancer, and the dancers can also pick the athletes. This practice, while still prevalent, has received mixed reactions from the dancers. Many participate, but some feel uncomfortable with the gendered expectations and wish for reciprocity, such as a system which bakes for the female athletes or for the Sundancers themselves. Interviewee 2, a male dancer, felt excluded by this tradition, as the sub-organization names and roles are explicitly gendered.

Drill Team as a Sport

While all dancers agree that dance is an art, the question of whether dance is a sport is still a common topic among the Sundancers. The majority believe it is a sport given the time commitment, endurance, technique, and energy required, comparable to sports like gymnastics and figure skating. The Sundancers' eligibility for Letterman Jackets, traditionally reserved for male athletes, further blurs the line between sport and art. Interviewee 3 said the field uniforms were like drill team "sports jerseys". However, a few dancers felt that the classification of dance as a sport may depend on the context, with competition dance more fitting the definition of a sport, while other forms of dance might be seen more as an art.

Costumes

Dancers have varying opinions about their costumes, particularly the field uniforms and more controversial outfits like the novelty costume of a hot pink tank top and tight flare leggings for a competition jazz dance the year this study took place. While most dancers find the field uniform comfortable and a source of pride, one interviewee questioned the appropriateness of wearing a skirt while performing high kicks. The novelty costume sparked debate within the team, with some dancers feeling uncomfortable and others seeing it as an ironic expression. The drill team directors even allowed the dancers to vote on whether to wear the hot pink costume in front of the student body. Ultimately, the decision was to not wear the costume. This was a disappointment for one interviewee who thought its boldness would be iconic and leave an impression for the student body. Overall, the uniforms are considered more modest compared to other drill teams, yet the balance between comfort, modesty, and expression remains a topic of discussion.

Choreography and Movements

The choreography of the Sundancers is generally well-received by the team, with directors adjusting to ensure moves are not overly sexy or inappropriate. However, some moves, such as crawling on the floor, hip movements, and middle splits, have sparked debate among the dancers, particularly in the context of performing for different audiences. While the team is comfortable with these moves in the studio or at competitions, performing them at school events like pep rallies can feel more uncomfortable. This discomfort may stem from the personal nature of dance as an expression and the challenge of presenting this side of oneself to peers who may not fully understand or appreciate it.

Discussion

The Sundancers' experiences highlight the tension between traditional gender roles and modern expressions of individuality within the drill team. While the team continues some practices rooted in Southern Belle stereotypes, such as baking for male athletes, it also challenges these norms by advocating for the recognition of dance as a sport and embracing diverse perspectives within the team. The uniformity required in appearance and performance does not erase individuality, as each dancer can still bring their unique style and expression to the team. Mostly, the dancers do not feel restricted by the beauty standards. The ongoing conversations about costumes and choreography reflect the dancers' efforts to navigate their comfort levels and empowerment through dance, ultimately striving for a balance between tradition and personal expression.

4.3 The Understanding of Femininity Shaped Through Drill Team Participation Dance as Identity and Expression

For the Sundancers, dance is not just extracurricular: it is part of their identity. With most drill team members having over ten years of dance experience, they cannot imagine life without dance. Dance serves

as a powerful medium for self-expression, allowing them to connect with their emotions and have a moment to give attention to their physical bodies. Additionally, every dancer mentioned that another part about dancing they loved was the community and sense of belonging. As Interviewee 1 expressed, each Sundancer profoundly values their role on the team, viewing it as "being part of something greater than myself" and contributing to a legacy.

Personal Growth and Transformation

Participation in the Sundancers has not only increased the dancer's dance skills, but it has fostered significant personal growth. The rigorous practice sessions, which often involve repeating and refining specific moves for peak precision, have instilled patience, diligence, and attention to detail in other areas of their lives. Additionally, many interviewees noted that their confidence and self-esteem have increased, making them have a more outgoing personality. This transformation is attributed to the mutual support within the team—the inspiration drawn from watching and being around confident and talented teammates. Interviewee 5 reflected on how being part of the drill team and interacting with her peers transformed her into a better person—inspiring her to work harder academically.

Empowerment and Redefinition of Femininity

From the interviews it was gathered that being in a drill team has shaped the dancers' understanding of femininity. Contrary to the stereotypical image of drill teams, the Sundancers feel empowered by their participation in the organization. The team is an accepting environment where dancers can embrace their femininity and engage in bold, expressive movements. Interviewee 1 remarked that the drill team helped her feel "more feminine unapologetically," while Interviewee 5 found empowerment in making slightly suggestive moves together with her teammates. The experience of being on the drill team has shown the dancers that femininity is not limited by traditional stereotypes but is instead a source of pride and strength.

Reevaluation and Changing Traditions

The Sundancers embody a balance between tradition and change. While drill teams are generally rich in traditions, the Sundancers have strived to embrace the motto, "Our only tradition is change." This approach reflects their willingness to evolve and adapt to modern-day times while preserving core cultural elements. Some traditions, such as Friday morning dress-ups, post-game celebrations, and practice rituals, are cherished by the dancers and contribute to the overall experience of being on the team. However, the team and its directors are open to reevaluating and modifying traditions that may no longer resonate with current values. For instance, the director allows the team to vote on dance moves and uniforms in attempt to make everyone feel comfortable. Additionally, the inclusion of the first male Sundancer in the program's history prompted discussions about evolving the team's standards to be more inclusive and creating accommodations for male dancers. This openness to change demonstrates the team's commitment to creating a supportive and inclusive environment.

Discussion

The experiences of the Sundancers reveal the complex and multidimensional nature of femininity shaped by drill team participation. The drill team serves as a unique space where traditional gender roles intersect with modern expressions of empowerment. While the team upholds certain traditions, it also challenges stereotypes by fostering an environment where dancers can redefine femininity on their own terms. The Sundancers' highlight the importance of growth, flexibility, and community in shaping their understanding of what it means to be a woman. As the team continues to evolve, it will be fascinating to see how they continue to navigate the balance between preserving their rich cultural heritage and incorporate new, inclusive practices that reflect the today's society.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the individuality and social dynamics within a high school drill team, –examining how participation in the team shapes their perceptions of femininity and the Southern Belle Stereotypes. Over 12 months of participant observation and five interviews, the findings revealed that drill teams are a diverse community, bringing together various identities, backgrounds, and motivations to create a unique environment. While the social structure can sometimes lead to tensions and slight fragmentation, the shared passion for dance fosters genuine connections among members. A key challenge for these high school dancers is balancing the demands of academics and the rigorous commitment to their team, often contributing to a stressful atmosphere. Despite this, most members take pride in the discipline and hard work that define their drill team.

The study also found that while Southern Belle stereotypes continue to exist, they do not significantly impact the experiences of most team members. The emphasis on uniformity in appearance is balanced with individual expression, allowing dancers to maintain their uniqueness and not feel constrained within the cohesive team dynamic. Drill team culture upholds traditional values such as respect, obedience, and service, yet it also provides a space that fosters empowerment and light-heartedness, challenging and transcending the stereotypes typically associated with drill teams.

Broader Implications

The drill team experience contributes to forming individual identities and fosters a sense of belonging, even amidst the challenges posed by social hierarchy and cultural barriers. Drill teams serve as a platform where traditional gender roles and the Southern Belle aesthetic are perpetuated and challenged. Members navigate these dynamics by finding empowerment in their femininity, reinterpreting what it means to be a woman within the framework of the drill team.

Limitations of Research

Five interviewees were used in this sample, and they may be representative of only some of the drill team. This research only investigates one high school's drill team, so the findings may not apply to all other drill teams. In the future, more research should be conducted to understand the drill team members' perspective of stereotypes and femininity. Perhaps the research can go towards women's empowerment goals, and these findings can hopefully bring another light to the stereotypes of beauty and sexuality commonly associated with being in a drill team.

Final Thoughts

Through my project, I found that the drill team is much more than just a dance group—it is a place where identity, traditions, gender, and beauty intersect in complex ways. Personally, the study deepened my appreciation for the nuanced experiences of a drill team member and helped me understand how we navigate these stereotypes in the modern day. As drill teams evolve, they will likely remain a key space for exploring Southern Belle stereotypes and femininity in a rapidly changing world.

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